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ABSTRACT

Higher education in the United States is facing a period of uncertainty, confusion, conflict, and potential change, and it has little to guide it in its past experiences. For most of its three and one-third century history, it has had a manifest destiny and through the period from 1820-1870 was marked by rapid change and some student unrest. Two factors remained constant: public belief in and support of higher education, and the campus and society were both changing, but in compatible ways. This is no longer so and higher education is faced with a staggering number of uncertainties: (1) the direction of change that will be taking place in a society that is ever more divisive, and in a world that is undergoing a cultural revolution; (2) the impact of the new educational technology; (3) its proper functions in terms of teaching, research and services; (4) the governance of the institutions; and (5) financing. The directions higher education will take include: (1) extending educational opportunity, regardless of race or income; (2) clearer rules governing the conduct of all members of the academic community; (3) cost effectiveness of operations; (4) more visible presidential leadership; (5) an increasing role of the federal government; (6) lower status jobs for college graduates; and (7) continuing tensions between intellectuals and society. (AF)

Opening General Session
Sunday Evening, March 14

DESTINY - NOT SO MANIFEST*

Clark Kerr

Address prepared for the National Conference on Higher Education
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Higher education in the United States is entering a great climacteric--a period of uncertainty, of conflict, of confusion, of potential change. Its present health is in doubt; its future fortunes are obscure; its fundamental constitution is being challenged. It is entering more than just another "new decade" among many decades past and prospective.

It enters this new period with little to guide it in its past experiences. Only once before in its three and one-third centuries since the founding of Harvard has it faced such a period of great transition, such a hinge of history, such a turning point in its axes of development. For most of this one-third of a millenium, it has had a manifest destiny; its course of progress marked by clarity and confidence.

Its first era of manifest destiny was from 1636 to about 1820, or about two centuries.

Higher education then served the great historical forces unleashed by the Renaissance and the Reformation. European culture, built on classical Greek and Roman foundations, was brought to and extended within the new society. And the doctrines of the Protestant sects animated all of the colleges and most of the teaching. The old culture and the new morality were the great themes of the academic world. The colleges drew their students largely from the upper middle classes and directed them toward the historic professions of teaching, law, medicine and the ministry. There was a clear idea of the attributes of the educated man and of the curriculum that would prepare him best. The colleges at Oxford and Cambridge were the models.

By 1820, this established concept of the good academic life began to be challenged more and more. By 1870 its fate was sealed. It was doomed to eclipse by a new vision. It would survive only as a dwindling element of American higher education. By 1970, the small (20 instructors or less)¹ residential college with a single curriculum for all its students was as rare as it was standard in 1820.

The period 1820-1870 may be instructive at the present moment for it also was a time marked by academic turmoil. Students were restless. They were protesting against in loco parentis and the fixed curriculum. One half of the graduating class of 1823 was expelled from Harvard. Young faculty members had new ideas. Ticknor, fresh from studies in Germany, began teaching and agitating at Harvard in 1819. He favored the system of electives and the higher intellectual standards then spreading through the German universities. Some presidents later joined the fray, like Wayland at Brown and Tappan at Michigan. State colleges and universities, free from control by any single religious denomination, had already been founded, beginning with Georgia and North Carolina, and were spreading in their appeal. Oberlin opened

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¹Harvard, the largest college, had 23 instructors (including tutors) in 1839.

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HE002 142

as the first coeducational college in 1833. The Land Grant idea of service to all the people was first propounded in 1850. The nation, also, was increasingly torn by social hostilities that led to the Civil War.

The central debate was over electives, between the proponents of the classical curriculum and those who favored new subjects--like foreign languages and science--and a choice among them. But there were many other issues: the degree of public control of colleges (as debated in the Dartmouth College case), "godliness" versus "godlessness," teaching versus research, liberal versus practical education, the cosmopolitanism of the Old World versus the provincialism of the New World, elite versus mass education, academic and moral standards versus student wishes, and others. The ancient regime remained largely intact for most of the half century after 1820, but the new order prevailed in the end. The crucial victories came with the passage of the Land-Grant Act by the national congress and the appointments of Eliot as president at Harvard and Gilman as president at Hopkins. At least by 1890, the new directions were clear for all to see, although in historical perspective it can be seen that they were already set twenty years earlier.

The new century for higher education that began with the end of the Civil War and ended recently reflected the forces that also animated the nation. The manifest destiny of America then was to develop much of a continent for the life of free man. Industrialization and populism and nationalism were the new themes. And higher education followed them too. Skilled persons were trained and technology developed for more efficient agriculture and industry, college places were created for not two percent but fifty percent of the age group, and the national purpose was served through research particularly during and after World War II. The goal of the nation and of the college was "success."² The colleges and universities of America came to lead the world in the transition from elite to mass higher education, in service to the productive forces in society, in the pursuit of scientific discoveries. It was an heroic century.

Throughout these three periods, at least two things remained constant. One was the consistency between the nature of the college and that of the surrounding society; the campus and the society were both changing but always in essentially compatible ways. The other was the constant public belief in and support of higher education; each new town wanted its own local college; more and more families looked upon college attendance as bringing entry into a better life for their children.

Now, once again, we are entering a time of troubles. For not much longer will higher education be one of the rapid growth points in our society. For one hundred years, the number of students in higher education has doubled about every fifteen years. In the 1980s, there will be no growth at all; and after that decade, the growth will be more nearly in accord with that of the total population and, thus, at a much slower rate. This is a traumatic shift. We are also no longer so sure about service. We ask more questions about what kind of service and to whom--research for the military? advice to the city? health service for the poor; it is no longer sufficient to offer almost any service to the powerful. And science has become suspect in some quarters; it may not lead only to the golden age but rather to "brave new worlds." Beyond that, society and the campus are in conflict as never before. The campus is now the chief locus of dissent, not the farm or the factory. Much of the public dislikes this dissent. It also senses an inherent conflict between the meritocracy of the campus and the democracy of the common man. It also

² Veysey writes of the university after 1890 as a "success-oriented enterprise." (Emergence of the American University, p. 439).

fears the impact of the new ideas originating on the campus on the life of man; and the new life styles also originating on the campus on the life styles of their children, alienating them from their parents. As a consequence, public support has suddenly become more doubtful.

Other things are also happening. As in the period 1820-1870, students are restless, and the faculty consensus developed over the past century is again being shattered by basic disagreements. And, once again, American society is marked by social divisiveness.

How long may this new period of uncertainty last? Will it once again be for half a century? No one can really know. Certainly, however, the next two decades at least, and each for different reasons, are likely to be difficult ones. In the 1970s, higher education will add by one-half to its student population under conditions of a prospective shortage of resources; and then, in the 1980s, for the first time in over a century, it will add no students at all. The 1990s, however, for demographic reasons, will once again be a decade of expansion.

I should like to comment briefly on what I consider some of the great uncertainties of this coming period to be; and then to end with a few notations on what seem to me to be clear new directions in higher education.

First, the uncertainties.

1. Higher education in the United States has always developed in close relation to American society as a whole. This is true, although occasionally to a lesser extent, of systems of higher education throughout history and throughout the world. Henry VIII in England, Napoleon in France, the Meiji restoration in Japan, Lenin in Russia, Mao in China--all profoundly affected higher education; as industrialization and the rise of science have affected higher education everywhere they have taken place. Consequently, to predict the future of higher education in this country, one must first predict the general future of the United States. And that is by no means entirely clear. In particular, the more divisiveness there is in society, the more there will be on the campus also. Higher education is a sub-system of the larger society, and it is a more integrated sub-system as a higher percentage of young people go to college and as knowledge becomes more central to the conduct of society. Higher education will rise and decline and change as the nation may rise or decline or change. The campus exists in dependency on its environment.

2. More broadly, on the world scene, we cannot yet be sure of the impact of the cultural revolution. It is possible that we are witnessing the early stages of a substantial change in styles of thought as happened, for example, with the shift in viewpoint from aristocratic to democratic doctrines at the time of the American and French revolutions. We may now be moving from an emphasis on self-denial inherent in the Protestant Ethic, but also in all successful "take-off" periods of industrial development, to one of greater self-gratification; from saving for the future to immediate consumption; from hard work to sensate pleasure. The classical college may be viewed as related to Consciousness I; the multiversity to Consciousness II; and the "free university," or no university at all, to Consciousness III. But it is not certain that Consciousness III will triumph or even can triumph in a society grown accustomed to the discipline of modern technology and dependent upon its products. And the cultural revolution might take a Maoist form of emphasis on the supremacy of political thought, including at least theoretical rejection of the role of the expert. Whether in its sensate or ideological form, the cultural revolution could have a great impact. Certainly we see today some consequences

of the view of college as place for enjoyment as well as for preparation for the future, as a place for ideology as well as for self-advancement. Until we know what form the cultural revolution may take and how effective it may be, we cannot be certain of the new directions for higher education. And full knowledge of the dynamics of this social process may be a long way off.

3. The new technology in higher education is only beginning to take hold. Eric Ashby once spoke³ of the four revolutions in educational technology: the transfer of education out of the family to the specialized teacher, the invention of the written word, the invention of the printed word, and now the electronic revolution with the radio, TV, the computer and the video-cassette. Each method of instruction continued as each new method became available in the past, and this, undoubtedly, will be true now also. But this new revolution will come faster around the world than the earlier ones. It may turn out to be as important.

4. The proper functions of higher education are under renewed debate. How much service and to whom? How much research and for what purposes? How much general and how much specialized education? How much defense of the status quo, how much dissent and how much revolutionary effort? Goodman has new supporters for his apprenticeship approach, Hutchins for the "great discourse," Flexner for pure research, and the revolutionaries for the campus as a base of operations. Some of the debate is like that which raged around the Yale Report of 1828; but the alternatives now are more numerous and the differences in position even more fundamental.

5. Governance is in dispute. Higher education in the United States has been governed by its several "estates"--the student, the faculty, the staff and the trustee estates--each with its own jurisdiction. Now nearly everybody wants to take an interest in nearly everything and there is less consensus about the whole endeavor. The estate system of governance depended on consensus about functions, on mutual tolerance among the estates, and even on apathy. The consensus, the tolerance, the apathy that made this system work no longer exist to the same extent. Two quite contrary forces are at work on this system. One is to create a more vertical system of authority leading from the governor, or the legislature or the trustees. The other is to provide a more horizontal system of authority with one person one vote or, beyond that, "participatory democracy" by the activists.

6. Financing is in doubt. How much by the students, how much by the state, how much by the federal government? How much for this higher education priority as against other social priorities? Never in a period of relative prosperity have the colleges been in so much of a depression and so uncertain of future resources.

These are some of the uncertainties, and there are no foreign models to guide us toward solutions as we once followed the British model and then later the German model; although we may hear, I believe, a good deal about Maoist theories and those of the early Marx--more about the theories than about the actual resultant practices.

Finally, a few comments about new directions. These, of necessity, will be more short-run in character and more specific than the uncertainties.

1. We will continue with the unfinished business of the past century--the extension of opportunity to more young persons regardless of family income, race and

³"Machines, Understanding, and Learning: Reflections on Technology in Education," The Graduate Journal, Spring, 1967.

geographical location; the extension of service more even-handedly to all parts of society and not so much to the powerful in particular; and the provision of lifetime chances at access to higher education.

2. We will develop clearer rules governing the conduct of all members of the academic community, more formal policies about enforcement, and more independent processes for adjudication of disagreements. In the absence of consensus and goodwill, the campus will become a more formal political entity and less of an informal community.

3. Cost effectiveness of operations will be more carefully examined.

4. More visible presidential leadership is likely to emerge during this period of transition as it did during the last one.

5. The federal government has become much more of a force in the 1960s, as it did in the 1860s; and this development, this time, is likely to be more permanent.

6. The labor market is already turning against the college trained. This is likely to continue. The premium paid for college training will go down as the supply of trained persons goes up. This process has already gone quite far in Sweden. The college trained will take jobs of lower status than they have historically (and they may change the nature of these jobs as they do) or go unemployed, and the range of wages and salaries will narrow to the disadvantage of the college trained. This is happening around the world. The coming revolt may be of the meritocracy against the egalitarianism of the common man, instead of the common man against the meritocracy.

7. The intellectuals will be in tension with the surrounding society. This has often been true throughout history. Now there are many more intellectuals. They are, by nature, divided among themselves, and, in part, against society. Technotronic society requires more intellectuals but some of these intellectuals also tend to rebel against some aspects of it. The campus will be involved in this tension.

Higher education in the United States, in the perspective of history, has been quite fortunate. In 330 years of existence, it has had only about 50 years of substantial uncertainty--1820-1870; now it faces the prospect of a second such period of unknown duration and, as yet, uncertain outcome. Climacteric I was survived and higher education came out of it stronger and better than ever. Climacteric II is now upon us. One thing is certain and that is that the answers are not all predetermined, that the final outcome will depend on the quality of our decisions as we move along and perhaps, particularly, on the early decisions as we begin to chart the directions as we enter this new century. And this is what this conference is all about.